

Ryan Padraig Kelly World

Geraldine recently got a job in a second-hand book shop, but after a series of local break-ins, her suspicions pointed to someone at work...

“The number of burglaries in this area gets bigger every week,” Dad grumbled. He jabbed the ‘Police Round-Up’ column of the local newspaper in disgust. “People will soon be afraid to go out at all.”

“I don’t know what the world’s coming to.” Mum leaned across our scrubbed wooden table to refill Dad’s cup of tea. “People used to be able to leave their doors

unlocked. Nobody ever stole anything, there was nothing to steal. Do you want any more tea, Gerry?" She angled the teapot over my empty cup.

I checked the clock above the dresser. A quarter of an hour till I needed to leave. "Just a half-cup, please. I don't want to miss the bus."

I was four days into my first week in my first job.

"Listen to this." Dad cleared his throat before reading out a paragraph from the *Keysborough Gazette*. "Jewellery worth more than three hundred pounds was

stolen from the home of Miss Romola Kendrick, in Hollies Road, North Keysborough, last weekend. Police found that a window had been forced open and believe that the theft took place between Friday night and Saturday afternoon. The jewellery, including a sapphire brooch, earrings and a gold pearl ring, was taken from the main bedroom.”

Romola Kendrick. It was a name straight out of school and adventure stories involving plucky heroines. I’d loved books like that as a child, and still sneaked a read of them even though I’d now

turned fifteen and had finally finished school.

“... four hundred pounds in notes stolen from the home of Norman Edwards in Avenue Road, Clinton Marby last week...” Dad frowned in consternation. Clinton Marby was the next village to ours. He sighed heavily and turned the page.

I swallowed the rest of my tea. “I’d better run.”

I started work at nine, and while there was a bus that got me to Keysborough at ten to nine, I preferred to catch the one that got me there at half-past eight rather than risk being late.

An hour later, I jumped off the bus and made my way along Keysborough high street, along with all the other commuters who worked in the shops.

Thursday was early closing day in Keysborough, so we'd all be finished by one o'clock.

I window-shopped as I walked, thinking of what I might buy with my first week's wages. I had to give Mum and Dad some board, and I was going to the pictures on Saturday with friends, but maybe I could buy a red lipstick, or the latest Elvis Presley single, or a

scarf. Or should I save up for some shoes or a Bolero jacket?

It was super to be finally earning a living. Although I hadn't much liked school, I'd always loved reading, and had liked the idea of working in a bookshop or library.

So I'd been delighted to get a job as a bookshop assistant at Fine Print Second-hand Bookshop, just off the high street.

Now, as I rounded the corner, I noticed Fine Print's lights were on. Good – Mr Johnson was already here, I didn't need to wait for the shop to open.

Through the mullioned windows, I could see him behind the counter, already talking to a customer, even though it was only quarter to eight.

The door jangled as I opened it, and Mr Johnson's head jerked up from the box of books he was riffling through. I spotted a flicker of annoyance cross his face when he recognised me.

"You're early, Miss Russell. I'm busy right now, so have a cup of tea out the back – the kettle's just boiled. Once I've finished with my customer, I'll organise some work for you."

Mr Johnson was in his sixties, with receding grey hair and glasses. He always wore three-piece suits that looked like they dated from the 1920s.

The customer couldn't have been more different. He looked about eighteen, had blond hair styled like Elvis Presley's and wore a rust-coloured suede bomber jacket.

He grinned and winked at me, and I blushed and scurried past.

The bookshop itself consisted of one large room where most of the books were shelved, and a smaller one to the side, where children's books were kept. At the back of the

shop was a poky kitchen, and next to it a large office-cum-storeroom where Mr Johnson did all the administrative work and sorted out the books he purchased.

He stored any valuable books in the office, to be sold to collectors or at auction. The other books were sold in the bookshop at reasonable prices. "I want the books sold, not sitting on the shelves forever," he'd told me on my first day.

I hung my gabardine mac on the hat stand and poured a half-cup of tea from the pot.

“... belonged to your aunt, you say?” I could hear Mr Johnson asking.

“Yes, that’s right. Me and Ma are trying to clear her house out. Ma was all for chucking them in the bin, but I said no, let’s see if we can get a bob or two for them.”

“A bob or two’s all I can give you, I’m afraid...”

I heard the ‘ding’ of the cash register and shortly after that the sound of the front door opening and closing. A few moments later, Mr Johnson carried the box of books into the office.

“When you’ve finished your tea, there’s a pile of books behind the counter, ready for shelving. I’ll make a start on working through these books. Call me if the shop gets busy or if a customer has a question you can’t answer.”

I glowed inside, thrilled that he trusted me to handle customers by myself already. The work wasn’t hard, really. Mr Johnson had taught me how to operate the cash register, and how to enter details on the ‘Sales Book’ he kept on the counter.

He had a second book for ‘Acquisitions’, where he recorded

the price he'd paid for the books. In the case of the rarer books, the price was a lot less than he sold them for. I'd been surprised when he'd told me how much some books were worth.

I finished my tea, and started working my way through the pile of books behind the counter. The first few were children's books, so I carried them into the children's book room. I made room on the 'B' shelves for the Enid Blytons – a couple of Famous Fives plus a Malory Towers book. It had been my love of the Famous Five, and the character George in particular, that had led me at the age of eight

to abbreviate my name from Geraldine to Gerry, and now everybody called me that.

Well, everybody apart from Mr Johnson!

Half of the remaining books were detective novels – several Agatha Christies, a couple of Margery Allinghams and a handful by authors I'd never heard of.

Even on just my fourth day, I already knew that Agatha Christies were quickly snapped up by customers. That was a shame, as I'd have liked to read some of them before they disappeared from the shop!

I'd just finished shelving the books when the door opened, and two elderly ladies stepped inside, making a beeline for the murder mystery shelves.

Within fifteen minutes, the Agatha Christies had been sold.

All those months when I'd been longing to leave school, Dad had warned me that I'd miss it once I started working.

"No more finishing at four o'clock," he'd said, "and no long school holidays or half-terms."

Well, he was wrong. I *much* preferred working to being at school.

Finishing at five o'clock and having the evening free was *much* better than walking home from school at four with a satchel crammed with homework.

And it was smashing having spending money too.

The only thing I wasn't keen on was that I had to work Saturday mornings. The only full day I had off was Sunday, and my Saturday and Thursday afternoons were free. But still, I was enjoying the job.

During my first six weeks, Mr Johnson took advantage of quieter periods to teach me some tricks of the second-hand book trade. He told me which authors, books and editions I should keep an eye out for. "You never know, you might spot one of these at a market or church jumble sale for just a few pennies," he told me.

He often came across valuable books that way himself. Sometimes he'd emerge from his office beaming over finding a valuable book among a box of otherwise cheap stock.

At school, I'd daydreamed about working in a modern bookshop. But already I was becoming interested in rare books. Perhaps, when I was older, I'd own my own second-hand bookshop. Maybe I could specialise in children's books.

"I want to own my own record shop too," my friend Pat told me one Sunday. She'd left school the same time as me, and worked in a record shop on the other side of Keysborough. "Then I can play records / like all day. Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly... Oh, I was wondering whether you'd like to go skating after work this Saturday?"

I nodded enthusiastically.

Keysborough Ice Rink had only opened a couple of months ago and I still hadn't had a chance to go there.

"Meet you there at two o'clock? It's the earliest I can make it," Pat said.

When I finished up at work at one o'clock on Saturday, I decided to walk down to the park and eat my sandwiches there. That would pass a bit of the time till I had to meet Pat.

The skies had been grey and it was chilly when I left Fine Print, but when I was about halfway to the park it started spluttering with rain.

Drat. I'd left my umbrella at the shop.

I dashed back to Fine Print, hoping Mr Johnson hadn't already left.

Fortunately the lights were still on. And, even though he'd put the 'closed' sign up when I left, Mr Johnson had a customer.

"So sorry," I said, as I entered. "I left my brolly in the kitchen."

Mr Johnson frowned and turned his attention to his customer, a lad of about eighteen, with dark hair and a black motorcycle jacket.

"And these belong to your gran, you say?"

“Yes, she’s moving in with us, and we don’t have room for all her books...”

I grabbed my brolly and hurried back outside.

Pat and I had a super time skating, and the afternoon went by all too quickly. It was teeming down when we left the rink, and we sprinted down to our bus stop under our brollies.

As the bus trundled down Keysborough High Street, I spotted the lad in the motorcycle jacket sheltering in the shoe shop doorway. He was smoking and chatting to another lad, one with

blond hair and wearing a rust-coloured bomber jacket.

The one who'd sold books to Mr Johnson during my first week.

I frowned. How strange that they knew each other.

Or maybe not strange at all. Maybe the blond-haired one had recommended Mr Johnson as giving a fair price for books.

“Wasn't the ice rink smashing?” Pat said. “When shall we go again?”

And I forgot about the lads as we started working out when we were next free.

“I’ve rather a lot of shelving for you today, Miss Russell,” Mr Johnson said on Monday morning. “The dreadful weather this weekend meant I stayed inside and worked my way through the backlog of unsorted books.”

Despite his words, I startled when I saw the piles behind the counter. ‘Rather a lot of shelving’ was an understatement.

He disappeared into the office while I began working my way through the piles. Romances, detective stories, science fiction, cookbooks... And then, at the bottom of one pile, a collection of

old girls' books, including some school stories.

I felt embarrassed about still enjoying this type of book at my age, so every time a customer entered the shop, I'd hurriedly put the book on the shelf and return to the counter.

One of the school stories was called *Pamela of Peters'*, and as I turned the pages, I spotted a reference to a character called Romola. I grinned: she was just the plucky, popular kind of character I'd envisaged someone with that name having.

Now, where had I heard that name before?

Oh yes, Dad had read it out – someone called Romola had been burgled a few weeks ago, and it had been in the newspaper.

I skim-read a few more pages of *Pamela of Peters'*, and was about to place it on the shelf, when a very thin piece of paper covered in writing slipped out of the book.

I read it, curious.

I found this book on the market the other day and discovered there's a character in it with the same name as you, Rommy! And I remembered you collected books with your

name in them. There can't be many books with your name in them, surely?

Love, Erica

I slid the note back in the book and filed it under 'L' for the author, Edna Lake. There couldn't be many real women called Romola either, especially in Keysborough.

Was the Romola who'd owned this book the same Romola who'd been burgled?

Had she got rid of her books or had they been stolen?

The shop door jangled and I hurried back to the counter. A man about

Mr Johnson's age, but with a full head of silver hair, was browsing the classical shelves.

"Can I help you with anything, sir?" I asked.

"No, thank you," he answered. "I'm just looking."

The 'Acquisitions' ledger lay on the counter, next to the 'Sales' book. I opened it, found the pages for April, and ran my finger down the entries till I found the one I wanted.

Edna Lake, *Pamela of Peters*,
Thursday 17 April.

That had been my first Thursday at work. The day the blond chap had

come in early, selling a pile of books. And a week after Romola Kendrick had been burgled.

I checked the entries for the other books purchased that day. One particular title caught my eye.

George Eliot, *Romola*, Thursday 17 April.

“Is Mr Johnson in today?”

I jumped. The silver-haired man smiled down at me from the other side of the counter.

I hurriedly closed the ledger. “He’s in the office. Can I help you?”

“I have some books I’m thinking of selling and I’m interested in what their value might be.”

Soon, Mr Johnson and the gentleman, who introduced himself as Malcolm Taylor, were discussing the collection. “I’ve a first edition of *Oliver Twist*, and a signed copy of *Jane Eyre*,” Mr Taylor said.

I spotted the gleam in Mr Johnson’s eyes, but he made a great show of slowly flipping the pages of his appointment diary.

“Any night but tomorrow,” Mr Taylor said. “I’m visiting my elderly mother in the evening and I’ll be staying overnight.”

“Is Thursday afternoon convenient?” Mr Johnson checked. “That’s when I usually do valuations because it’s early closing day.”

“Yes, that sounds fine,” Mr Taylor agreed.

Once he’d gone, I carried on shelving the remaining books. The final six were Chalet School books. I’d loved the Chalet School when younger.

The initials ‘BL’ had been scrawled on the inside cover of all of them, and on the title pages had been written ‘To Barbara, love from Mother and Father’. They’d been

presents for Christmas and her birthday.

Lucky Barbara. At her age I'd always been given clothes – and unfashionable ones at that.

Mum kept old newspapers in a big box in our boxroom, so we could use them for firelighters. That night, I sorted through them, searching for the 17th April issue of the *Keysborough Gazette*.

When I found it, I turned to the 'Police Round-Up'. And there she was: Miss Romola Kendrick, Hollies Road, North Keysborough.

I chewed my lip as I wondered whether I should visit Romola Kendrick, ask whether she'd got rid of her books or if they'd been stolen along with her jewellery. The 'Police Round-Up' probably didn't list everything that was stolen – it would take up too much space.

Anyway, I wouldn't be able to call on her until my half-day on Thursday.

It still bothered me that those two lads who'd brought in books knew each other. If they were selling stolen goods to Mr Johnson, they might get him into trouble.

I was about to go downstairs when it occurred to me that if those two lads *were* robbers, they might have sold other stolen books to Fine Print.

I grabbed a pen and notebook and jotted down the names of people who'd been burgled over the past two months.

Excitement surged through me when I spotted the name 'Barbara Leonard'.

Could she be the owner of the Chalet School books that had been brought in?

I could hardly wait for next morning when I could check when those books had been purchased.

“Miss Russell, could you look after the shop for a couple of hours after lunch?” Mr Johnson asked me next day. “There’s a preview of an upcoming auction and I don’t want to miss it.”

“Of course,” I said. A week ago I’d have been pleased just to be left in charge of the shop. Now I was ecstatic at the unexpected opportunity to do some sleuthing.

As soon as he’d gone off to the preview, I checked the Acquisitions

book. The Chalet School books had brought in a week after the burglary at Barbara Leonard's – just as had happened with Romola Kendrick's books.

Had the books the dark-haired boy brought in on Saturday afternoon come from another burglary the previous week?

Those books were still in the office. Mr Johnson hadn't finished sorting through them yet.

My heart thumped and my mouth went dry as I turned the sign on the shop door to 'Closed'. Reassuring myself that it was in Mr Johnson's best interests to know if he was

being duped by thieves, I twisted the handle of the office door.

It was locked.

He kept the key in a drawer under the sink. I grabbed it and unlocked the door.

Books covered every inch of shelf space in the office. I began opening books at random, looking for something – anything – that indicated a match with any of the names in my notebook.

And then I found it – a pile of military memoirs, all inscribed inside ‘P. Maddocks’. A man called Percy Maddocks had been burgled

recently, according to last week's *Keysborough Gazette*.

I put the books back down, wondering what to do next. Mr Johnson wasn't due back till just before five and it was only half-past two. Should I call the police or wait till I'd told Mr Johnson first?

Perhaps I should close the shop, head down to wherever the auction preview was and tell him. Then he could inform the police – it was his shop after all.

Mr Johnson's appointments diary lay on his desk, next to yet another pile of books.

I flipped through the pages,
searching for today's date.

Tuesday 3 June

*2.30: auction preview,
Newhampton Town Hall*

*Evening: Taylor – 6 Carrs Lane,
Keysborough*

Alarm bells sounded in my head at the second entry. He wasn't visiting Mr Taylor tonight! Mr Taylor was going to be away overnight, he'd told us that. I turned the page to Thursday, when they'd planned to meet.

Nothing.

Mind racing, I flipped back through the pages of the diary. I hoped I was wrong, and that Mr Johnson and Mr Taylor had simply rescheduled, but the diary confirmed that my suspicions were correct. He'd had 'appointments' with Romola Kendrick, Barbara Leonard, Percy Maddocks, Norman Edwards... On the dates they'd been burgled!

Mr Johnson wasn't the victim in this – he was the villain! No wonder he'd been irritated when I'd walked in unexpectedly when those lads were in the bookshop. He must have made up the 'aunt' and 'gran' excuses on the spot.

Mr Taylor lived near the railway station, only a ten-minute walk away. I grabbed Mr Johnson's spare shop key from its drawer, shoved the diary and notebook in my handbag, and locked up the shop.

I *had* to warn Mr Taylor not to visit his mother tonight.

"You worked this all out yourself?" Malcolm Taylor said.

His eyes sparkled as we sat inside his living room, together with his wife who'd proffered tea and cake.

He hadn't been surprised about being the target for a burglary. In fact, it turned out he was a private

detective, employed by Romola Kendrick!

She'd become suspicious when a friend of hers was also burgled, with jewellery, money and some books being stolen. She thought the police weren't doing enough, so had hired a private detective instead.

"They'd both visited the bookshop and talked to him about books they collected," Mr Taylor told me. "So I interviewed some other people who'd been burgled – and some of them had visited the bookshop too. Not all of them, of course! Not every burglary in the area was the

work of the lads that Mr Johnson employed.

“I followed him to a jewellery store in Newhampton last week, which turns out to be owned by Mr Johnson’s brother-in-law. Both of them were in on it and operated in the same way. Valuable jewellery and books were kept for a while, and then sold through catalogue or auction. Cheaper jewellery and books were kept for a few weeks then sold in the shops at a price which meant they were snapped up quickly.

“I was never actually leaving the house this evening. I’d already

informed the police and we were setting a trap for him.

“But I’m very impressed with your sleuthing,” Mr Taylor finished up.

“And I hope you’re just as good at acting. Because you need to go back to the bookshop and pretend everything’s fine when Mr Johnson returns. We don’t want him getting suspicious. Can you do that?”

“I think so,” I said.

I got back just in time to put the diary and the keys where I’d found them. To my relief, Mr Johnson went straight back into the office so I didn’t have to make any awkward conversation.

“You what?” Mum said when I got home and told her and Dad about the day’s events. “Oh, Gerry. What if you’re wrong?”

“I’m not,” I assured her. “Either way, though, I’ll lose my job.”

I felt glum about that. There were other bookshops, but I’d enjoyed working at Fine Print. Just my rotten luck to have worked for a dishonest employer!

At around eight o’clock there was a knock at our door. Dad let Mr Taylor in.

“Well, the boys broke in as expected,” he said. “The police were hidden in there and heard

them talking about the money they'd get from Mr Johnson and his brother-in-law and so they were able to arrest them too.

"We got your address from Mr Johnson, so we could tell you what happened. The shop won't be open tomorrow. Mr Johnson will go to prison."

"I feel like I'm in a book," I said. "Solving a mystery like the girls in the books I used to read as a child." I sighed. "This doesn't end happily for me, though, because now I don't have a job."

"Yes, you do," Mr Taylor said. "I wasn't pretending to be a collector

– I am one. I’m getting a bit long in the tooth to be a private detective and I’ve always fancied the idea of owning my own bookshop. So I’m going to buy it – and you, Miss Russell, will be my assistant. Assuming you’re interested, of course?”

“Of course I am,” I said. “There’s just one thing?”

“What’s that?”

“Could you please call me Gerry?”